Purchasing popular purebreds: investigating the influence of breed-type on the pre-purchase motivations and behaviour of dog owners

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Introduction

Contemporary estimations of the domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*) population of the United Kingdom (UK) place it at around 10.5 million (Murray et al 2010), approximately 75–80% of which are purebred (Asher et al 2011; O’Neill et al 2014). The process of selecting for breed-specific characteristics in purebred dogs has been identified as having the potential to reduce dog welfare (Rooney & Sargan 2010), with strong links between breed standards and inherited diseases in the top 50 Kennel Club (KC) breeds (Asher et al 2009). In addition, reduced genotypic variation within these same breeds substantially increases the prevalence of genetic disease (Summers et al 2010). Public concerns regarding the welfare of purebred dogs and associated selective breeding practices have resulted in a number of high profile reports to address those concerns (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare 2010; Bateson 2010).

Humans have a large appetite for variety in the appearance and behaviour of dogs, with 216 breeds currently KC-recognised (The Kennel Club 2015). Breed popularity within the dog population has remained largely stable, but with substantial, and often culturally driven, surges in the popularity of specific breeds (Herzog et al 2004). Social influence (fashion) is the primary influence on the popularity of companion dog breeds, which is often related to media exposure, e.g. featuring in movies (Herzog 2006; Ghirlanda et al 2014). Both in the United States of America (USA) and the UK, breed popularity appears to lack direct associations with functional traits (e.g. health, trainability) (Herzog 2006; Ghirlanda et al 2013) whilst displaying a concerning tendency for more popular breeds to have greater numbers of inherited disorders (Ghirlanda et al 2013). Increased demand may, therefore, place pressure on breeders to provide more individuals from a genetically constrained breeding population. In turn, this demand will increase the number of extant recessive disorders being expressed. With regards to the appearance of popular breeds, if demand is based on the extreme appearance of certain breeds, this may result in higher levels of conformation-related disorders in the canine population.

Evidence suggests that brachycephalic (short-muzzled) breeds in particular, such as the Pug, French Bulldog and Bulldog have shown substantial increases in numbers in the UK over the past decade (The Kennel Club 2016a). Herzog

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